

An Analysis of the Dual Opposition Structure of Life and Death Presented in Ancient Myths

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Abstract: Binary opposition is the central idea of structuralist criticism. Based on the theory of structuralist mythology, this paper uses the comparative method to analyze the binary opposition structure model of life and death by taking the typical myths of ancient Greece and ancient China as cases. Explores the ancient times the deep psychological structure of the ancestors, feel the deep reasons for the formation of different national cultures and psychology. Purpose attaches importance to the value of human life, inherit and carry forward the excellent national spirit.

Keywords: ancient mythology, binary opposition, life and death, belief in ghosts and gods, spiritual pursuit.

The concept of "binary opposition" can be traced back to the field of linguistics. Saussure put forward a series of dualistic concepts such as "signifier and signified", "diachronic and synchronic", "language and speech" in his book "General Linguistics Course". The theory of binary opposition has attracted the attention of Western literary circles, and has gradually developed into a literary criticism method, which belongs to the category of structuralist criticism. The anthropologist Levi Strauss was influenced by this theory, in his "Structural Anthropology", he believed that myth and language have the same structure and function. Myth "language" is the systematic rules of myths and legends. It is the unconscious thinking mode of human beings in the form of myth elements, which belongs to the deep structure; while the myth "language" is a specific myth and legend, which belongs to the surface structure. He also proposed that myths are both diachronic and synchronic, and that myths have a dualistic structure. Ancient myths contain a variety of deep psychological structures of human beings, mainly the binary opposition structures such as man and nature, divinity and humanity, good and evil, life and death. This paper mainly based on the theory of Lévi-Strauss binary oppositional structuralism, compares ancient Greek mythology with ancient Chinese mythology, and explores the deep reasons for the formation and development of the ancient ancestors' psychological structure.

The ancient ancestors thought about everything in the world from the understanding of man and nature, man and society. This kind of thinking uses myths to express contradictions and oppositions, the most prominent of which is life and death. Ernst Cassirer pointed out that "the fear of death is undoubtedly one of the most common and deep-rooted human instincts" [1]. People go from bewilderment about death to fear, to finding ways to come back from the dead. For example, the famous ancient Greek stories of Orpheus and Eurydice. Storyline Mode Analysis: Protagonist: Orpheus and Eurydice—Cause of Death: Violation of Prohibition—Method of Death: Poisoning—Who died for: Lord of Hades—Resurrection: Relatives—Resurrection Method: Resurrection by emotion. In comparison, let's look at the storyline mode of Jingwei's reclamation in ancient Chinese mythology: protagonist: female baby (Jingwei)—cause of death: natural force—death method: drowning to death—Who died for: natural force—bring it back to life By: Self-Resurrection Method: Resurrection by revenge. It can be seen that the myth of "Rising from the Dead" has a similar plot structure. Due to the influence of different cultures, the myth of "Rising from the Dead" has its own characteristics in the form of the story, which

also shows the inclusiveness and diversity of the myth. The above myths, through the story of resurrection from the dead, transcend the barriers of yin and yang, communicate the polarities of life and death, and vividly reflect the ancient ancestors' thinking about death and the meaning of resurrection.

Immortality are the ultimate goal of people's pursuit of a happy life. In order to avoid the reality of death, the primitive ancestors used myths as the answer to their thinking problems, and produced many myths to express the belief people's spiritual pursuit.

For example The Classic of Mountains and Seas has the following record :

Busimin is in its east. Its people are black-skinned and live a long life and never die.

There are people who have three faces. They are the descendants of King Zhuanxu. They have three faces and one arm, and never die.

East of the Quicksands and by the *Heishui* River there is Mount *Busi*.

North of where *kaiming* lives there are *shirou*, the red jade tree and the never-die tree. East of where *kaiming* lives there are many wizards and witches such as Wupeng, Wudi, Wuyang etc. Surrounding the corpse of Yayu, they all hold the never-die medicine to pray to gods to seek his survival.[2]

The above myths are actually the imaginations of the ancestors to free themselves from the fear of death. They reflect the ancestors' desire and pursuit of immortality.

The Pangu myth is the origin myth of the Chinese nation, which contains the ancestors' thinking about the beginning of the universe and the origin of all things. The earliest document recording Pangu is the 《San Wu Li Ji》 written by Xu Zheng, a native of Wu during the Three Kingdoms period: "Before the opening of the world, heaven and earth were in a chaotic mess, like an egg. Pangu was born here. After 18000 years, heaven and earth separated, the light and clear Yang Qi rose to heaven, and the heavy and turbid Yin Qi sank to the earth. Pangu is in the middle of heaven and earth. Pangu is in the middle of heaven and earth, and there are many changes in a day. His wisdom is higher than the sky, and his ability is stronger than the earth. The sky rises ten zhang higher every day, the earth thickens ten zhang every day, and Pangu grows ten zhang more every day. After another 18,000 years, the sky rose very high, the earth sank very deep, and Pangu grew very tall. After the world opened up, the three emperors of the world appeared"[3]. The metaphor of "chicken" comes from *Hun Tian* said. 《Kaiyuan Zhanjing》 quoted Zhang Heng's 《Army Sphere Note》 saying: "The sky is like a chicken. The celestial body is round like a projectile, and the earth is like a yellow in the chicken. Living alone in the sky, the sky is big and the earth is small. There is water on the surface of the sky, and the sky covers the earth. It is like a yellow shell wrapped in yellow"[4].

The boundless celestial body is imagined as a cosmic egg, the earth like an egg yolk, at the center of the universe. The egg hatches the chick, and the cosmic egg hatches the Pangu. Pangu was born from chaos, the world is in chaos, and the heaven and the earth are naturally intermingled. The sky and the earth are just two phases transformed by Pangu. In Pangu's world, Pangu is the heaven and the earth. In primitive society, primitive ancestors always believed that "heaven" was the supreme existence, and all the sacredness came from the sky. In his book Primitive Culture, Taylor said: "China's dominant national religion is the worship of heaven, and heaven is equal to God. The second is earth (*houtu*). Next are the spirits of nature and ancestors"[5]. The opposition between heaven and earth in nature is combined with the opposition between male and female, father and mother in society. The opposition between heaven and earth in mythology is transformed into the opposition between men and women, and the opposition between men and women extends to all aspects of nature and human society, such as upper and lower, husband and wife, father and mother, ruler and minister. Therefore, the dualistic worship of heaven and earth and male and female appeared in the ancient Chinese ancestor mythology in the form of "heavenly father and earthly mother". Pangu changes nine

times a day. It has been changing for 80,000 years. What did it finally change? are people. Ancient China tells stories of changes, such as the seventy transformation of Nuwa and the seventy-two transformations of Sun Wukong, all of which eventually become human. Human is the final result of the evolution of the universe. It can be said that the growth of Pangu is unconscious and belongs to natural behavior. The ancient ancestors used the growth process of Pangu to speculate on the growth of the universe. The height of Pangu is the height of the universe, and the spirit of Pangu's self-improvement is the spirit of the universe.

Pangu was originally the incarnation of the godhead of the universe, but people prefer Pangu who is full of humanity. In myths, Pangu is not immortal, and after his death, he is transformed into all things. For example, according to Zhang Junfang of the Song Dynasty Collection: "Before Pangu died, he turned his eyes into the sun and the moon, his limbs and head into the five mountains, his blood into the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, his hair into mountains, forests and trees, his muscles into soil, his bones into gold and stones, and the parasites on his body into the earth. His breath turned into the common people" [6].

Although Pangu died, his flesh and blood spirit still filled the universe, and his will to live was carried out in the mountains, rivers and trees. He not only raised the life realm of the entire universe, but also raised the wilderness to the center of human civilization, making people feel that life has limits. Therefore, Pangu found an evolutionary path of complementary yin and yang for human beings. The death of gods represents the true birth of human beings. People understand that death is inevitable, and the value of life will be paid more and more attention. For a person who integrates his own life into the life of the ethnic group, the death of his individual only means that all his life values have been transformed into the life of the ethnic group. This is a spiritual realm of selfless dedication and the life realm of Pangu's dying incarnation.

In addition, Ye Shuxian draws on the principle of binary opposition of structuralism, trying to formulate a set of cosmic models based on mythological thinking symbols, and further structural analysis and systematic restoration of the medieval and ancient mythological cosmology. Symbolic opposition based on the vertical system of cosmic patterns in Zhuangzi :North and South; *yin* and *yang*; fire and water; movement and stillness; false and real; with or without; action and inaction; male and female [7]. It is from this special duality that Ye Shuxian concluded that the counter-culture of Zhuangzi's philosophy (that is, the opposition to the orthodox culture centered on benevolence, righteousness, ritual and music at the time) can be clearly summarized: This book regards "life" as mourning, and "death" as its opposite, advocates the politics of "Do nothing", and adopts a life attitude that conforms to nature.

In short, in addition to Pangu, there are Nü Wa, Houji, Kuafu and so on. There are many myths about resurrection and metamorphosis in ancient Chinese mythology.

In contrast, Dionysus, the god of wine and carnival in ancient Greek mythology, is one of many gods revered in the West. Dionysus was the son of Zeus. His mother was killed by Zeus' thunderbolt due to jealous Hera designs. Zeus sewed the baby into his thigh, and Dionysus experienced "two births. "It can be said that the existence of Dionysus is the unity of opposites of life and death. In the festival of Dionysian sacrifices, people constantly simulate the process of Dionysus' resurrection through sacrifice rituals. Dionysus represents an irrational behavior, represents binge drinking, confuses oneself, and is supported by a spiritual idea of pursuing death and resurrection and immortality of the soul. Resurrection is not only the beginning of new life, but also represents a kind of reincarnation. The courage and determination to take on the sacrifices is reflected in Dionysus' suffering.

Therefore, resurrection and metamorphosis are both the primitive ancestors' pursuit of immortality, and there is a difference between them. Resurrection follows the pattern of life-death-life, while metamorphosis is the continuation of life in other forms; sometimes the boundaries between them are different. Ching, Stith Thompson (1885-1970) concluded in 《The Taxonomy of World Folktales: "Folklore is not only contradictory and ambiguous in the concept

of soul, but in This is also true in the story of resurrection and transformation, where it is difficult to draw a clear line between the two. A person, animal or object changes its shape and appears in another new shape, which we call transformation; But if a creature dies between these two stages, we call it resurrection”[8].

The myth of the dead soul and the underworld originates from the ancient view of soul and life. Believing that all things have animism and the soul is immortal is the consensus of our ancestors in ancient times in China and the West. In the long age of mythology, our ancestors developed a unique concept of life and death based on their own understanding of life and death, which is mainly expressed in the expectation of longevity of life, the imagination of body materialization and the belief in immortality of the soul. Because of the belief in the immortality of the soul, the dead heroes have become various gods of the descendants. For example: the hero Hercules in ancient Greek mythology, he is the offspring of gods and people. He was born "well-born," with all the characteristics of a human being. He is diligent and studious, and chooses to take the "good" but hard path. He has accomplished such things as taking the pelt of the Nemean lion, driving away the strange bird of Sjenpharos Lake, and bringing the guard dog Kerr of Hades, the Hades of Hades. Twelve pieces of work including Palos. He became the representative of collective strength and wisdom, reflecting the excellent quality of diligence and bravery displayed by the ancient Greeks in the process of overcoming the forces of nature.

Let's look at the ancient Chinese myth "Gun revived Yu". In order to control the flood and save the common people, Gun did not hesitate to steal the infinitely self-sustaining soil to cover up the flood. The Emperor of Heaven was angry and ordered Zhu Rong to kill Gun. Gun died for three years but his body did not rot. Yu was born out of his stomach, and the Emperor of Heaven had to order Yu to inherit his father's business and governance flood level to determine Kyushu. It can be said that Gun represents the belief in the soul of man. His body dies but his soul is immortal. At this time, he has surpassed mortals. After his death, he can still conceive and give birth to Yu. This is to pass on this belief to the next generation “The embodiment of immortality”. Chen Lianshan once analyzed the structural transformation relationship between the myth of Dayu and the myth of Gun, and believes that these two myths are structurally related and can be transformed into each other: “Gun is the opposite of Dayu, and Gun's ending is also the opposite of Dayu's ending. X is the mythical element, and Y is the positive meaning it assumes; $1/X$ is the opposite of X, and $1/Y$ is the opposite of Y. It can be concluded that $X:Y=1/X:1/Y$. His analysis specifically regards the structure of the mythical text of the Qimushi stone as a small structure in the large structure of mythology, which is transformed with the small structures of the myths such as Dayu's control of the water, Gun control of the water, and Hou Yi's shooting the sun to form the large structure of ancient Chinese mythology”[9].

“The specific relationship between heroes and gods varies in form (or father and son, or son-in-law, or vassal, or hostility...), but they are always very close. Sometimes, heroes are gods, and their origins can be clearly traced back to the beginning of heaven and earth. and the Supreme Founding God”[10]. It can be seen that in the early stage of human society, the ancestors of China and Greece had different orientations to heroes. Heroes in Greek mythology mainly express human courage and wisdom, and endow heroes with extraordinary strength and combative character to achieve the purpose of conquering nature. The heroes in Chinese mythology are closer to human beings. Most of them are the embodiment of ethics and morality. They win by hard work and perseverance. Of course, wisdom as an indispensable factor is also reflected in heroes.

Conclusion: Although life and death are diametrically opposed, they are two sides of one. The beginning (birth) of a "human" life is due to the combination of the "feminine existence" of the soul and the "masculine existence" of the body, and once the soul and the body are separated, the human life will come to an end (death). This kind of life and death change of human life is actually the process of the union and separation of the soul and the body. The primitive ancestors regarded death as a link in the transformation of life forms. Life and death are just the cycle of life. Death itself is not the end of life, but only a synonym for the transformation of life forms.

As a result, death became no longer scary, and the ancestors completely got rid of the fear of death.

In the face of death, the values and spiritual essence of human life embodied in ancient Chinese and ancient Greek myths are the same. However, due to cultural differences, the tension between fate and personality is more felt in ancient Greek mythology. In the fate of death, personal ability and autonomous will cannot change the outcome. But in the face of death, ancient Greek mythology emphasized the significance of individual courage, wisdom, and strength to society, affirming the true happiness of life and the spiritual value of life.

Ancient Chinese mythology regards ethics and morality as the standard to measure the value of death, and has two very prominent value tendencies. One is to focus on practicality. Anyone who is respected as a god, respected and loved by others, has done great deeds or is right. People have interests; the second is to have a tenacious spiritual pursuit—Pangu is the image representative of the spirit of the Chinese nation.

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